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Hamas is the largest Palestinian militant Islamist group and one of the two major political parties in the region. It is also designated a terrorist group by Israel, the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and other countries.

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Palestinian militants drive back to the Gaza Strip with the body of an Israeli soldier on Saturday, Oct. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Ali Mahmud)

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Israel declared a state of war after Palestinian militants launched barrages of rockets into southern and central Israel and dozens of them crossed the border fence in several locations on Saturday (October 7). At least 22 Israelis were killed and more than 500 people were injured in the attacks, according to the *BBC*.

Attributing the attacks to the Palestinian militant group Hamas, the Israel Defence Forces began to carry out air strikes on Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by the organisation.

In a statement, Israel's Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said, "Hamas has made a grave mistake this morning and launched a war against the State of Israel".

Meanwhile, Mohammed Deif, the leader of Hamas' military wing, said 5,000 rockets had been fired into Israel early on Saturday to launch what he called "Operation Al-

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Aqsa Storm". "We've decided to say enough is enough," he added.

What is Hamas?

Hamas is the largest Palestinian militant Islamist group and one of the two major political parties in the region. Currently, it governs more than two million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The organisation, however, is also known for its armed resistance against Israel (more on this later).

Hamas as a whole, or in some cases its military wing, is designated a terrorist group by Israel, the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and other countries.

How was Hamas formed?

The group was founded in the late 1980s, after the beginning of the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising, against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip — the Jewish state had captured the two Palestinian territories after winning the 1967 Israeli-Arab War.

Hamas is essentially "the internal metamorphosis" of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, which was established in Jerusalem in 1946, according to the book, 'Hamas: A Beginner's Guide', by Khaled Al Hroub, professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Northwestern University Qatar.

"The Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood remained on the margins of Palestinian politics for decades till the 1980s and the reason for this was their strategy, which was non-confrontational… They believed they needed to Islamise the Palestinian society and it was a prerequisite for an engagement with the wider battle against Israel. In brief, they didn't use armed struggle," Khaled told *Al Jazeera* in an interview.

But in 1987, when the first Palestinian intifada took place, the organisation decided to transform itself — and "established Hamas as an adjunct organisation with the

specific mission of confronting the Israeli occupation," the professor wrote in his book.

The main reason for Hamas' creation was a deep sense of failure that had been set within the Palestinian national movement by the late 1980s. This primarily happened after the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) — involved in the armed struggle against Israel from the mid-1960s to 'liberate Palestine' — made two massive concessions.

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One, the PLO recognized Israel and its right to exist — thereby, relinquishing its goal of liberating Palestine. Two, it also dropped the armed struggle as a strategy, for the sake of a negotiated settlement.

"At the very same moment, you have Hamas saying we want to adhere to the military strategy. So, you have the rise of resistance on the side of Hamas and the decline of resistance on the side of the national forces," Khaled told Al Jazeera.

How did Hamas begin its 'resistance'?

Hamas gained prominence after it opposed the Oslo Peace Accords signed in the early 1990s between Israel and the PLO, the body representing most Palestinians. The accords aimed to bring about Palestinian self-determination, in the form of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

The well-known White House lawn handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzakh Rabin (left) and the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization Yasser Arafat (right), with US President Bill Clinton in the centre. (Wikimedia Commons)

The Palestinian militant group, however, was against them as it believed "a two-state solution would forgo the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the historic lands seized from them in 1948 when Israel was created," a report by Al Jazeera said.

To break down the deal, Hamas launched suicide bombings. It carried out numerous bus bombings, killing many Israelis, and stepped up its attacks after Israel killed the group's chief bomb maker Yahya Ayyash in December 1995.

The bombings are believed to be responsible for Israel's withdrawal from the peace process and the rise of Benjamin Netanyahu, who was a staunch opponent of the Oslo Accords, to power in 1996, according to the BBC.

The failure of the peace process wasn't only Hamas' fault, though. According to the Al Jazeera report, right-wing Israelis didn't want to give any concession to the PLO and Israeli settlers resisted the deal as they "feared it would lead to their eviction from the legal settlements in the occupied territories."

Hamas' suicide attacks once again made headlines during the second intifada between 2000 and 2005 — it began after the peace talks between Israel and Palestine completely collapsed.

How did Hamas gain political power?

In 2006, the militant group registered an astonishing victory in the democratic elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) of the limited Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

There were several factors behind Hamas' win. Some supported the group's tactic of carrying out the bombings against Israelis to avenge their own losses. Others recognised its efforts to help the poor and needy by organising schools and clinics.

Another reason was the "failure of the peace process, combined with the ever-increasing brutality of the Israeli occupation, left the Palestinians with no faith in the option of negotiating a peaceful settlement with Israel," Khaled wrote.

What are some of the worst flare-ups between Hamas and Israel?

Over the years, Israel and Hamas have been in a perpetual state of conflict and the Jewish state holds the group responsible for all attacks coming from the Gaza Strip.

The deadliest face-off between the two sides took place in 2014. At least 2,251 Palestinians, including 1,462 civilians, were killed during 50 days of fighting. On the Israeli side, 67 soldiers and six civilians were killed.
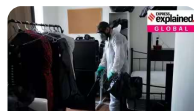
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In May 2021, hundreds of Palestinians were wounded in clashes with Israeli security forces at the Al Aqsa compound in Jerusalem. After demanding Israel withdraw security forces from the compound, Hamas launched a series of rockets from Gaza into Israel. Israel hit back with air strikes on Gaza. Fighting went on for 11 days, killing at least 250 people in Gaza and 13 in Israel.

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